

Alternative MLRS Emplacement— 1x3-Kilometer Formation

In his letter contained in the September-October 1995 edition ["The Problem with the OPAREA"], Lieutenant Colonel John M. House points out a problem with which every MLRS [multiple-launch rocket system] platoon leader can identify. The 3x3-kilometer platoon OPAREA [operational area] is a great concept—on paper. Quite simply, Lieutenant Colonel House is correct; the space is not there.

As an MLRS platoon leader for two years with A/21 FA [A Battery, 21st Field Artillery], 1st Cavalry Division [Fort Hood, Texas], I found space for MLRS operations at a premium in every scenario, ranging from the Persian Gulf War to corps Warfighters exercises at Fort Hood—even on the CBS [corps battle simulation] computer in the SimCenter. The battlefield, even in the wide open expanses of the desert, is crowded. I found this true in the barren desert of northern Saudi Arabia and southern Iraq.

The 1x3-Kilometer OPAREA. Sergeant First Class Johnny McCoy and Staff Sergeant Tony Zarrillo, my platoon sergeant and third section chief, respectively, helped me develop a concept that cuts the space required to position an MLRS platoon to three square kilometers—one-third of the area designated by doctrine—with no appreciable degradation in capability. The one-kilometer-by-three-kilo-

meter strips shown in the figure each have nine firing points at least 500 meters apart (doctrinal). The major adjustment is that the ammunition resupply points (ARPs) and the platoon operations center (POC) are now on the OPAREA boundary.

This concept is based on a set pattern of firing points that ensures dispersion and prevents launchers from crossing over old firing points or their own routes to ammunition resupply—as shown in the figure's scheme of maneuver. It also prevents launchers from firing over each other.

Of course, one inherent weakness to this "set play" is its adaptability to uncooperative terrain. That's where the creativity and instincts of the platoon leader and section chiefs become paramount. No terrain totally fulfills a leader's expectations. Knowledgeable section chiefs, however, understand the capabilities and limitations of their weapon system and almost always can find a suitable firing point.

Each section chief must understand where his launcher fits into the big picture. The 1x3-kilometer platoon OPAREA requires cooperation and discipline. The OPAREA boundaries must be coordinated with higher headquarters and are inviolable without permission from the POC.

The ARPs and POC are on the edge of the OPAREA. Generally, one ARP is

placed on each side. Launchers don't travel more than one kilometer to an ARP—not true in a 3x3-kilometer OPAREA. The POC positions are based on METT-T [mission, enemy, terrain, troops and time available] with the most important factor's being communicability with the launchers and the battery operations center [BOC].

In the proposed OPAREA, the three MLRS sections move in set patterns (adapted to the terrain) and have easily accessible ammunition resupply and clear command and control. This scheme opens possibilities and is realistic in terms of terrain availability.

Admittedly, this solution lends itself best to desert warfare—the terrain in which we designed the OPAREA. However, we found it adequate for the hilly terrain of central Texas as well. Using our 1x3-kilometer OPAREA, our ARTEP [Army training and evaluation program] occupation times averaged one-half of the standard for day and night operations. We often accomplished occupations with no radio transmissions.

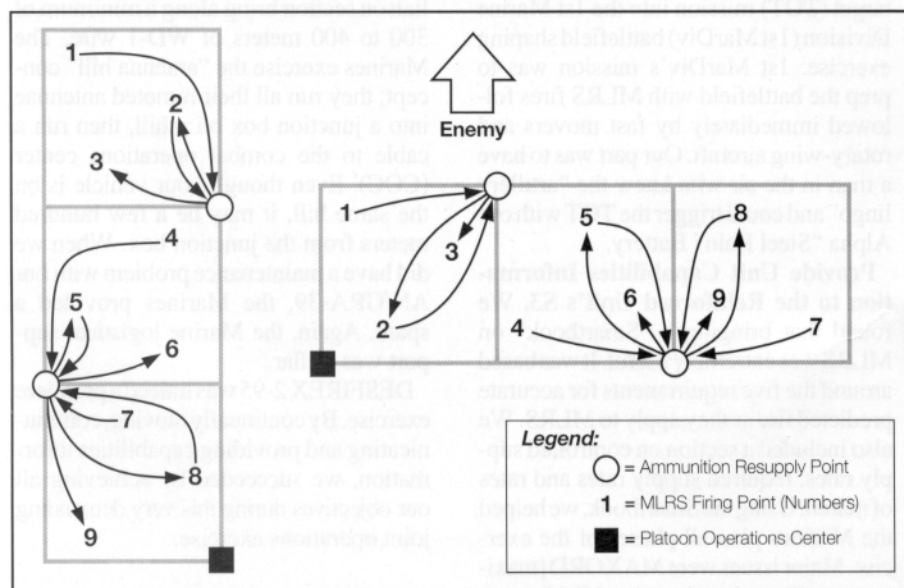
The 1x3-kilometer OPAREA may not be the best possible solution in all scenarios, but it's one MLRS platoon's attempt to increase survivability, minimize response time and use the minimum amount of space on a crowded battlefield.

MLRS Platoon Defense. I also would like to address the other issues that Lieutenant Colonel House discussed. First, platoon defense is always a concern. A defensive perimeter may make everyone feel safer, but the fact is that the MLRS platoon is so lightly armed that it could not defend itself against a well-trained and equipped light infantry squad. Passive measures, such as communications security and downright hiding, are the best defense.

True, the signature of an MLRS is the most obvious and visible on the battlefield. That calls for the consistent and disciplined use of hide areas, dispersed firing points (at least 500 meters) and well-planned routes between firing points and ammunition resupply points.

As far as security from enemy maneuver is concerned, if an MLRS unit ever faces enemy ground forces, our situation can be defined as "untenable," at best.

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Two examples of MLRS platoon positioning in 1x3-kilometer operational areas (OPAREAs). Each OPAREA has nine firing points with three assigned to each launcher in 1x1 kilometer boxes. The launchers use each firing point once in numerical sequence.